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ABSTRACT

This study examined children's responses to several questions about their use of display rules for expressing emotions--i.e., about the circumstances in which they would (1) mask or hide their feelings, (2) dissimulate their feelings through substituting another affective expression, and (3) express their feelings. A total of 60 children, aged 6, 8, and 10 years, were shown comic strip scenarios of four interpersonal conflict situations and asked about the characters' feelings. They then answered questions along the lines noted above about their own experience concerning those feelings. The 6-year-olds differed significantly from 8- and 10-year-olds in having fewer instances of both masked and dissimulated display usage. The 8-year-olds did not differ significantly from the 10-year-olds. Sex of subject had no significant main effect or interaction. Qualitative analyses indicated that children in all age groups were readily able to cite reasons for masking or hiding feelings; one of the most common reasons cited by all age groups was to avoid embarrassment and derision. Older children showed somewhat greater subtlety than younger children in their suggestions for dissimulation. With increasing age, children cited significantly more circumstances in which it would be appropriate to express one's feelings. Response details are provided in appendices. (Author/SS)

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When NOT to Show What You Feel: Children's Understanding of Relations between Emotional Experience and Expressive Behavior

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One of the most intriguing issues in the development of affect concerns the degree to which facial expression is congruent with internal emotional experience. Oster's (1978) research suggests that neonates have the anatomical and physical capacity for generating most of the facial muscle patterns seen in adult facial expressions of emotions. However, we would hardly infer that these early facial expressions correspond to the same emotions as experienced by adults. On the other hand, adults can deliberately produce facial expressions which represent dissimulations or masking of their internal emotional experience which young infants are unable to do.

Display rules appear to be at the center of this differentiation between overt expressive behavior and covert emotional experience. With increasing cognitive complexity and socialization children learn to monitor or regulate their expressive-affective behavioral displays according to social conventions. Not only do children respond to the situation they are in and experience some resulting emotion, they also begin to appraise the communicative or interpersonal setting surrounding the emotion-eliciting situation and monitor their expressive

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behavior accordingly. This increasingly systematic monitoring of affective displays is accomplished by the child's gradual learning of display rules, which govern the conventional appropriateness of expressive behavior as determined by the particular culture. Display rules appear to fall into four categories, according to Ekman and Friesen (1969): (a) intensification or maximization of certain emotional displays, e.g., we receive a not especially desirable gift, but we intensify the displayed pleasurable affect because the gift-giver expects us to be pleased, and in our culture it is socially appropriate to show pleasure at receiving a gift; (b) deintensification or minimization of an emotional display may occur as, for example, when it is considered socially inappropriate to express much joy at beating a competitor; (c) neutralization of facial expressions may occur, e.g., if we receive verbal criticism on the job, it may be most adaptive and appropriate to maintain a "poker face" in such a communicative context, and finally, (d) one may dissimulate one's emotional response to a situation by substituting another affect display, e.g., anger at someone in a superordinate position relative to our own may be converted into a smile (accompanied perhaps by gritted teeth).

According to both experimentalists (see Ekman, Friesen & Ellsworth, 1972) and ethologists (see Charlesworth & Kreutzer's review, 1973), there is virtually no systematic research on developmental trends in the acquisition of display rules. We sought to examine children's responses to several questions about (a) when they would mask or hide their feelings, (b) dissimulate them through substituting another affective expression, and finally (c) permit their feelings to be expressed. In the present study we also asked school-age children

to respond to four different interpersonal conflict situations (shown in comic strip style, but with photographs of real children). Their responses were multi-level, and data from a portion of their interviews have been recently reported elsewhere (Saarni, 1978). However, following each of these four conflict situations, we then asked the children about their own experience of display rule usage along the lines of the three questions noted above.

Method

Sample

The sample consisted of sixty middle class, urban, average (or above) IQ children, equally divided according to sex and age (six-, eight-, and ten-year olds). They were residents of West Greenwich Village in Manhattan and attended public school.

Stimulus materials

Four interpersonal conflict situations -- hereafter called scenarios -- were developed from pilot testing. They were: (a) the skating scenario -- a child boasts about his/her skating ability to another child and then falls down; (b) the gift scenario -- a child receives a very disappointing gift from either a friend or an aunt; (c) the bully scenario -- a child is bullied by another child in front of an on-looker; and (d) a child sets off a school fire alarm and is then intercepted. (See the earlier report for details of development, Saarni, 1978.) However, since each child answered questions about their own display rule usage following each of these scenarios, the content of these situations is important, for it did influence some children's responses thematically, as noted in the appendices.

Interview questions

Testing had indicated that children typically collapsed the minimization display rule with that of hiding or neutralizing one's affective facial expression. (They contended that minimization was equivalent to an incomplete masking or hiding of one's facial expression.) The maximization display rule (exaggerating one's affective display) was used by the pilot testing subjects as a type of dissimulation. Thus, in order to limit children's fatigue in the interview, we posed only two display rule questions (masking and dissimulation) and a third question about when it would in fact be appropriate to show what was one feeling. The exact wording of the questions is in Appendix A.

Results

Scoring

The transcriptions of each child's responses were evaluated blind and independently by two judges. The average per cent of agreement was 96%. Since each child responded to the same three questions for each of the four scenarios, frequencies were summed across the four scenarios to yield final scores.

Analyses

The results were first analyzed in a multivariate analysis of variance; the factors were age (3) and sex (2), and the dependent variables were (a) total number of instances of masking display rule usage and (b) total number of dissimulated instances. The age factor was significant with a multi $F(2, 54) = 2.17$, $p < 0.02$. Follow-up univariate analyses indicated that six-year olds differed significantly from eight- and ten-year olds in having fewer instances of both masked and dissimulated display rule usage. While the eight-year olds

were intermediate in frequencies between the six- and ten-year olds, they did not differ significantly from the ten-year olds. Sex of subject had no significant main effect or interaction.

Qualitative analyses

In Appendix B I have noted the kinds of qualitative responses the children gave when asked if they had ever felt a particular emotion and had hidden it (i.e., through neutral expression masking) so that no one would know, and why had they done so. The particular emotions listed (pain or hurt, fear, disappointment, anger, and a general miscellaneous category of emotions) were those cited by the children in the four conflict scenarios which they had already answered questions about. Only two emotion categories had significant age differences: masking disappointment, $\underline{X}^2(2) = 10.24$, $\underline{p} < 0.05$, and masking miscellaneous emotions, $\underline{X}^2(2) = 8.96$, $\underline{p} < 0.05$. I think it is descriptively noteworthy that children in all age groups were readily able to cite reasons for masking or hiding feelings, and one of the most common reasons in all age groups was to avoid embarrassment and derision. (Avoidance of derision is implied in several other responses as well.) Even young grade school children are well aware that their facial expressions and body movements are perceived by others and are used by these others to infer feeling states to which these others respond, often with teasing and derision.

Appendix C contains the qualitative response categories given by the children to the question about misleading someone about what they were feeling by dissimulating emotional expressiveness. As mentioned, the overall age difference was significant, and while chi-square analyses were not performed on the specific

qualitative responses, I think again they are descriptively illuminating for the kinds of situations or circumstances children cite as the reasons for why they would attempt to dissimulate their emotional experience by substituting another expression. The most frequent kinds of circumstances cited by the children across age groups are for playful purposes, for getting attention, for making someone feel sorry for you, and to get help. The older youngsters show somewhat greater subtlety in their suggestions for when one would want to dissimulate, such as to look sick when one really feels upset, to fake anger so as to get a "righteous" revenge, to laugh to cover nervousness, and so forth.

Finally, Appendix D contains children's response categories to the question about when it would in fact be appropriate to show one's feelings. Significant age differences were again obtained for overall totals, $\underline{X}^2 = 17.44$, df = 2, $\underline{p} < 0.01$. With increasing age, children cited significantly more reasons for when it would be appropriate to show one's feelings expressively. Out of our nine general categories, the two most frequently cited reasons for when it would be OK to show one's feelings were (a) if they were very intense or (b) if one was sick, injured, and bleeding. In descending order after these first two categories of reasons were (a) if one were with certain people such as parents or friends, (b) if special or unusual misfortunes occurred (such as being in a fire, falling off a building, dropping one's homework in a puddle, having one's lunch stolen, if one were threatened by really bad kids, etc.), (c) if one were in a special setting or environment (such as in an amusement park, in a horror movie, alone, watching TV, etc.), (d) if one were a little kid, (e) if one were being scolded or had been caught doing something wrong, and finally, (f) one

ten-year old said if one had been unjustly accused one should show how one feels about it.

Conclusion

The older children in this study clearly realized that internal emotional experience and external affective expression need not correspond to each other. Many younger children also understood this differentiation but less frequently articulated it; competence and performance issues are probably implicated here. The absence of sex differences suggests that the common assumption that girls are interpersonally more attuned and astute than boys is incorrect when it comes to monitoring and understanding affective displays and reasons for when one would want to show one's feelings or, conversely, mask or dissimulate them.

While adults may take for granted the monitoring of expressive cues, that ability is only gradually constructed during childhood. Clearly recursive thinking about the interpersonal transaction is required as well as some sense of social expectations. Cognitive development, socialization of communication forms, and consciousness of internal emotional experience -- despite contradictory expressive behavior -- are among the complex prerequisites for display rule usage.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions for Display Rule Usage

1. Masking display rule:

   "Have you ever felt ---------- (fill in with the emotion the subject gave for the main character of the scenario) but not wanted anybody else to know it, like you tried to hide your feelings? Can you tell me about that time?"

2. Dissimulation (including exaggeration) display rule:

   "Can you think of a time when you wanted to make someone think you were feeling ---------- (fill in with emotion the subject gave for the main character in the scenario) inside, but you were <u>not</u> really feeling that way? Can you tell me about that time?"

3. Appropriate to show feeling:

   "Have you ever felt --------- (fill in with the emotion the subject gave for the main character in the scenario), but it didn't matter if anyone knew, like it was OK for them to see you feeling that way? Can you tell me about that time?"

Appendix B

Masking Display Rule

	FREQUENCY
I. Masking pain or hurt (no significant age differences)	
A. 6-year olds:	
mask hurt to avoid derision or embarrassment	7
mask hurt to avoid inconveniencing others	2
mask hurt to avoid going to the hospital, doctors	1
total:	11
B. 8-year olds:	
mask hurt to avoid derision or embarrassment	10
mask hurt because of fear that mother will yell at you	1
mask hurt because one has been boasting	1
mask hurt in a fight in order to keep on fighting	1
total:	13
C. 10-year olds:	
mask hurt to avoid derision or embarrassment	5
mask hurt because one has been boasting	1
mask hurt to avoid going to hospital	1
mask hurt: "takes pain off not to think about it"	1
total:	8
Grand total:	32
II. Masking Fear (no significant age differences)	
A. 6-year olds	
mask fear to avoid derision or embarrassment	4
mask fear about shots	1
mask fear about having one's lies found out	1
mask fear when one's fear may be foolish or unfounded ("it might be a bird and not a bat after all")	1
total:	7

B. 8-year olds:

mask fear around bullies	7
mask fear to avoid derision	4
mask fear about impending punishment from father	1
mask fear about being found out about some misdeed	1
total:	13

C. 10-year olds:

mask fear around bullies	5
mask fear so that you look "big"	2
mask fear in a fight	1
total:	8
Grand total:	28

III. Masking Disappointment (significant age differences)

A. 6-year olds:

mask disappointment over unwanted gift to protect feelings of the giver	1
total:	1

B. 8-year olds:

mask disappointment over unwanted gift to avoid being rude	5
mask disappointment over unwanted gift to protect feelings of the giver	3
mask disappointment because mother gets upset whenever she sees it	1
mask disappointment from a rejecting friend	1
total:	10

C. 10-year olds:

mask disappointment over unwanted gift to protect feelings of the giver	5
mask disappointment over unwanted gift to avoid being rude	4
mask disappointment to avoid derision	1
total:	10
Grand total:	21

IV. Masking Anger (no significant age differences)

A. 6-year olds:

mask anger over unfairness ("when somebody gets more than you")	1
total:	1

B. 8-year olds:

mask anger in order to appear calm	1
total:	1

C. 10-year olds:

mask anger in order to seem nice	2
mask anger to "blot out" feelings	1
mask anger if someone accidentally breaks something of one's own	1
total:	4
Grand total:	6

V. Miscellaneous Emotions (significant age differences)

A. 6-year olds:

mask feelings to avoid trouble	2
mask feelings if someone is not nice to you	1
mask feelings in order to forget them	1
total:	4

B. 8-year olds:

mask feelings to avoid trouble	1
total:	1

C. 10-year olds:

mask feelings to avoid trouble	4
mask embarrassment	3
mask shyness if new at school, party	2
mask sadness when a pet has to be given away	1
total:	10
Grand total:	15

Age Group Totals

6-year olds:	23	(significant age differences)
8-year olds:	38	
10-year olds:	40	

Appendix C

Dissimulation Display Rule

Response Categories	FREQUENCY
A. 6-year olds:	
if you are fooling, joking, playing, for fun	7
if you want to pretend	7
if you want to get attention by being funny	3
if you want somebody to feel sorry for you	1
if you want to turn an irritating kid off	1
if you want to look different in a game	1
if you are play-fighting	1
if you are a movie actor	1
if you want help	1
total:	23
B. 8-year olds:	
if you are fooling, teasing, for fun	8
if you want to pretend	6
if you want attention	5
if you want somebody to feel sorry for you	4
if you want to get someone in trouble	3
if you want help	2
if you want to get candy	2
if you want to trick someone	2
if you like to bother people	1
if you are an actor	1
if you want to act "girlish"	1
if you want to get reassurance	1
if you want to sue somebody	1
if you want to imitate your friend	1
total:	38
C. 10-year olds:	
if you are playing, joking, fooling, teasing, in a game	12
if you want somebody to feel sorry for you	8
if you want to pretend	4
if you fake sick, you can avoid school, gym	3
if you want to get out of a fight	3
if you want attention	2
if you want help	2
if you want to get the advantage in a fight	2
if you are imitating someone, something	2
if you want to avoid trouble	1
if you act sick when you really feel sad and upset	1
if you look disappointed, you might get another gift	1

C. 10-year olds (continued):

if you fake anger, you can get revenge	1
if you fake fear, you can stop parents' scolding	1
if you laugh, you will cover nervousness	1
if you want to trick someone	1
if you are play-fighting	1
total:	46

Appendix D

Appropriate Circumstances in Which to Show Affect

Response Categories

A. OK to show feelings if they are very intense (e.g., "genuinely surprised," "very angry," "very scared," "really hurt feelings," etc.).

6-year olds:	3
8-year olds:	9
10-year olds:	19
total:	31

B. OK to show feelings in case of illness, injury, severe bleeding.

6-year olds:	9
8-year olds:	10
10-year olds:	11
total:	30

C. OK to show feelings when with certain people (e.g., parents, friends).

6-year olds:	5
8-year olds:	10
10-year olds:	4
total:	19

D. OK to show feelings when special or unusual misfortunes occur (e.g., in a fire, hit by a car, lunch is stolen, "if really bad kids are threatening you," "if you break something special of your parents," "if you drop your homework in a puddle," etc.).

6-year olds:	1
8-year olds:	5
10-year olds:	8
total:	14

E. OK to show feelings if you are in special environment (e.g., in a horror movie, in an amusement park, in a hospital, etc.).

6-year olds:	1
8-year olds:	4
10-year olds:	4
total:	9

F. OK to show feelings if you are a young child.

6-year olds:	1
8-year olds:	-
10-year olds:	1
total:	2

G. OK to show feelings if you are being scolded or have been caught in a misdeed.

6-year olds:	-
8-year olds:	1
10-year olds:	1
total:	2

H. OK to show feelings if you are unjustly accused: total of 1 10-year old.

Age Totals

6-year olds:	20	(significant age differences)
8-year olds:	39	
10-year olds:	51	